

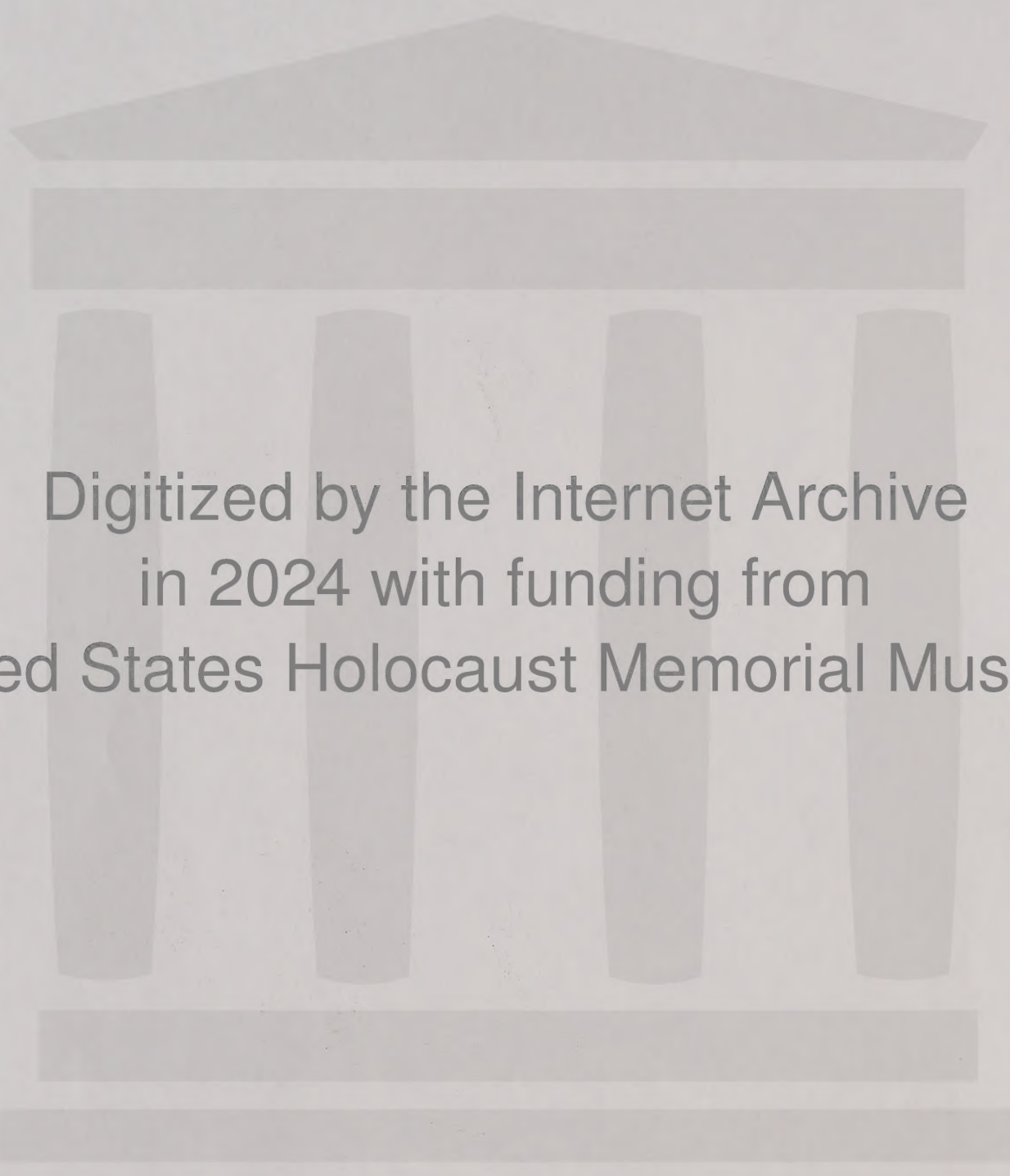


ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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THE VAULT

Rena Berliner

1995

It was a cold and rainy fall day. The year was 1942 and the German occupation of our town was three years old. Hunger and disease were raging. Frequent "actions" decimated the Jewish population to a third.

I was lucky, thanks to my profession, to be able to get a job at a factory where parts for sewing machines were made. The meager food ration that I received helped to feed the rest of my family, especially my mother who was ailing. Thanks to my ability to work with the most precise machine parts, I was highly respected and even liked by our German director.

On that memorable day I was called to the director's office and told that he was asked to send somebody to the Gestapo headquarters to open a vault that was broken. Since I was considered very experienced and capable, the German chose me to do it. With no choice in the matter, I had to agree.

I had to go there accompanied by a Jewish policeman. It's not hard to imagine my fear of not being able to open the vault; would I be shot right away or tortured and sent to a death camp,

When I arrived home that evening and told my family about it, their fright was beyond imagination. My poor mother, who was ill, wrung her hands and cried bitterly. She would not be able to continue to live if anything happened to me.

That night no one slept.

Early in the morning, a Jewish policeman knocked on the door. I was ready and we left. When we arrived at the Gestapo headquarters, what struck us were signs everywhere, "Ruhe" (Quiet). A uniformed Gestapo man appeared and brought me to the vault. He handed me a key and the rest was up to me.

I tried to put the key into the keyhole, to no avail. It didn't go in. I tried again and again and nothing happened.

I felt sweat running down my back. "This is the end of me," I thought, and in my mind, I was saying good-bye to my poor mother. What is she going to do without me?

I held the key to the vault in my hand and tried to concentrate on how I was going to fix it and what to do. Suddenly, like a bolt of lightening from the sky, a thought struck me. I asked the Gestapo man to bring me a large safety pin or a very thin screwdriver. He brought me a safety pin, which I opened. I inserted the thin part into the keyhole and started cleaning it. A lot of dirt came out. I knew that this was all I could do. With trembling hands, I inserted the key into the lock once more, and miracle of miracles, the key went in all the way and the door of the vault opened. The Gestapo man who was watching grinned with admiration and patted my arm.

I was relieved to the verge of crying.

The Jewish policeman who waited for me outside brought me back to the factory and told the director what had happened. The workers applauded and I was given an extra portion of soup as a reward.

The joy at home that evening was indescribable.

A few days later, my dear mother died in my arms, emaciated from hunger and malnutrition. She had been reduced to a virtual skeleton.

